Island on the Edge of Eternity
Part One

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"Nzh'iax, that simply isn't true."

"Oh, really —"

"It *can't* be." The scientist gestured across the stage at their opponent. "Think of the psychological evidence. Our brains react more favourably to light when its patterns emulate those of light-waves emitted by the larger, rarer stars of the main sequence — even the light of stars so much as ten times ours is enough to register. Surely our original sun must have fit that profile — yet the odds of a sapient species evolving around one of those stars in *your* model is *astronomically* low."

"Psychology? *Please,*" Nzhi'ax scoffed. "You must realise that in a cosmological debate, such 'evidence' reeks of desperation."

"Yet you have no explanation —"

"Because I don't *need* one!" Nzhi'ax snapped — then exhaled, and turned to the audience. "Distinguished friends, my honoured kin has, once more, utterly failed to address the major flaws in their model. I tire of this. Again and again, they hope to side-step the fundamental unworkability of their competing hypothesis by fixating on superficial solutions to minor areas of uncertainty within the established model. Science is imperfect, but we cannot allow that to justify the discarding of a perfectly functional theory in favour of I don't know what half-baked nonsense —"

At this Nzhi'ax seemed again to regret her tone, and, controlling themself, she turned back to face her rival.

"I ask *again*, Rhyz'ir. The Universe is one hundred billion years old. If any event matching the characteristics of this so-called 'Big Bang' of yours had truly occurred at its inception, your own calculations predict that a highly specific form of — of cosmic, ultra-low-frequency background radiation, should permeate all of space. We can detect no such thing. Even in the earliest era of the past that we can travel to, our time-agents have found no trace of it. Where has it gone?"

"I don't know," Rhyz'ir said after a moment.

A hush fell over the hall; Nzhi'ax inhaled, not daring to believe that her opponent had conceded at last. Within seconds, her scepticism was vindicated as Rhyz'ir spoke again.

"But we don't *know* the Universe is that old," they argued, their voice calm. "Or, rather, that *young*. Supposing, for example, that it were one hundred and fifty billion years old — such a background would have a low enough frequency that it would be blocked by the interstellar medium and remain extragalactic."

There seemed to be a resignation in Rhyz'ir's voice, even as they pointed to the gaps in Nzhi'ax's understanding, the possibilities the standard model obscured. Truth might be on their side, but they knew they were losing ground. They always did. However hard they tried to keep their poise, they could not stop their antennae from drooping a fraction of an inch as the hostile, or, worse, *sympathetic* stares of the audience bore into them.

Rhyz'ir was one of the Censere; at seven feet in height, they were tall, but not unusually so, and their horn-like, vestigial antennae were both curvier and more rigid than was typically considered attractive, giving them what other species might have described as a disheveled look. Though they were an insectoid species, the Censere's two large eyes and bipedal, digitigrade stance made it easy for xertonoid races to 'read' them, even if one considered the large holes down both their arms and legs.

A proud, yet wise race, they were the oldest surviving species in established history, and a founding member of the Universal Cooperation Council. Without their guidance, the Universal Island might never have been united into a benevolent collective. Over untold millennia, the U.C.C. had ushered untold numbers of the local lifekind into a new age of peace, civilisation, and scientific endeavour; the Universal Island, which they understood to be the sole cluster of life-supporting proportions in the whole void of space, had turned from a war-torn wilderness into a well-oiled machine.

Only one great shadow cast its pall over the Censere's enlightened age, and that was the mystery of their own beginning; for the true origins of their species, and indeed of the entire *Universe* were the province of guesswork and legends. Evidence failed and the scientific method floundered; conventional

academia was content to offer a few vague hypotheses about coalescing gas-clouds and evolutive pressure placed upon some lost species of hive insects.

Yet the legends did exist, and in the whole existence of the Censere race, there had been one researcher bold enough to do what none of their fellows had dared. Rhyz'ir had taken that body of myths and old-wives'-tales at face value — and marvelled as a self-consistent model popped straight out of the results, a model which, if proven to be true, would as good as topple the whole of accepted Censere cosmology. Emboldened by the clarity of their discovery, they had wasted no time in trying to do just that, in full view of the world.

Though they were not blood-kin — any Censere might address another as 'kin' as a mark of friendship, or even professional respect — Rhyz'ir and Nzhi'ax had almost identical backgrounds; they had shared the same education, and parallel career paths. And yet, one had become the fringe radical trapped on a backwater colony at the edge of the Universe, while the other was the famous scientist with her own research lab on the U.C.C.'s capital-world of Locus. All because Rhyz'ir had dared to tell the truth as they saw it.

Nzhi'ax scoffed. She'd been doing a lot of that lately.

"And there we have it. You just want to add an extra fifty billion years onto history, without any proof. Here we are, the oldest civilisation in the known Universe, and we *know* we're no older than a hundred billion years — so what was happening for those first fifty? Why was there no life before us?"

"The Locus ruins s —"

"The Locus ruins," Nzhi'ax interrupted the stillborn argument, "are exclusive to one planet, and limited in scope. Even accepting their veracity as more than evidence of some time-mission, they are *not* sufficient to assert the existence of some lost, fifty-billion-year-old galactic civilisation; we *know* there were a handful of ill-fated predecessor civilisations to predate ours — on a scale of a few million years, not *billions*. You, my kin, are making up numbers to explain away glaring flaws in your model. You would not be so

impulsive if you would step back, and consider the implications of your rash hypothesis — the sheer *magnitude* of your claims."

Rhyz'ir grimaced, baring their two large fangs. It always ended this way. They had no real evidence; they knew they never would. Their own calculations spoke to an understanding of the Universe according to which they, and the rest of the U.C.C., lived in an era long past its prime. In time, everything must come to dust — all things. Everything died, even the evidence of death. In Rhyz'ir's innermost mind, the conclusion was clear; at the time-scales of which their numbers spoke, everything primordial must simply have been erased by the ravages of time. What would be left of the Censere and the Cooperation Council in another hundred billion years' time? Perhaps naught but a few, unidentifiable ruins on some remote planet. But if Nzhi'ax's mind could not withstand the likelihood of that outcome, there was nothing Rhyz'ir could do to open her mind. Dust proved nothing.

Still, they would not admit defeat, not just yet. They had danced this waltz many a time, and there was one final spin left to execute, one last track of inquiry.

"What about star formation?" they offered. "You accuse me of making up numbers to support my model — the official account of solar aggregation rates is starkly implausible, and you know it. By any reasonable *prima facie* estimate, the Universal Island could *not* have formed as many stars as it currently comprises in a mere hundred billion years. There isn't enough *time*."

That turned a few heads — but Nzhi'ax was having none of it.

"With respect, honoured kin, we *all* know about the star formation issue. I readily admit that it's no 'minor area of uncertainty' — quite the opposite, it is an active topic of research. But the answer *will* be found, and our stellar experts are convinced that their conclusion will *not* involve invoking an extra fifty billion years of history, phantom background radiation, or, gods forbid, other Islands."

Rhyz'ir cringed. *That*, they felt, was unfair of Nzhi'ax, even if one set their disagreements to one side. Despite their commitment to the truth, Rhyz'ir knew to pick their battles, and it had been quite deliberate of them not to mention the old legends' claim that their Universal Island was but one of

many; that the Cosmos extended far beyond the Censere's understanding in space, and not just time. That, too, was the truth as Rhyz'ir saw it — but they knew how it sounded, and had elected not to bring it up today. One revelation at a time. Now Nzhi'ax had put them on the spot.

"The ancient accounts," they said reluctantly, "*do* seem to assert the existence of various structures of equal size to the Island, or greater. The very fact that we think of our home as an 'Island', and not, for example, a 'Continent', might be argued —"

"Oh, *please*," Nzhi'ax interrupted them. "*Anything* 'might be argued'. Once more… guesswork and fairy tales. Any scholar of the arts will tell you the same thing; poke at a word long enough and you can make it mean whatever you want it to mean, consciously or otherwise."

And of course, it fell back on this — their trump card, the bedrock of their certainty.

"But that's just it," they said, already knowing what Nzhi'ax would reply. "I *can't*, and you couldn't either, if you actually engaged with my data. Those legends all point at a *single,* self-consistent model of the Universe shared by an overwhelming majority of the ancient storytellers — a model deeply at odds with ours. That *cannot* be a coincidence!"

A few seconds passed as, for a moment, Rhyz'ir almost allowed themself to believe that they had won the audience over. Again Nzhi'ax spoke, and that hope shattered.

"Why not?" she asked simply.

And Rhyz'ir had no response.

What was there to say? To any outside view, Nzhi'ax was right, as always. Not persuasive, not convincing on balance — plainly, self-evidently *right*. Their model was far-fetched; however improbable the convergence of ancient myths from a dozen cultural backgrounds might appear, Rhyz'ir could not argue with the logic of the woman who retorted that it would take far greater feats of chance to erase fifty billion years' worth of galactic history, a whole catalogue of species, any trace of their wars and technologies — all *except* for

some ruins and a handful of fairy tales. Seen from outside, it was sheer madness, and they knew that.

And yet they couldn't help but believe. These circular arguments about priors and probabilities were all they ever engaged in; no one had ever actually *disproved* their model on the merits, simply convinced whatever intellectual bodies would listen to Rhyz'ir's case that it was *unlikely*. A moral victory at best, in a world where 'theoretically sound, but wildly unlikely' did little to secure research budgets, but the scientist clung to that consolation like a lifeline. *One day, they might win.*

But not today. That debate was over, and they'd lost… again.

Nzhi'ax offered her hand, but Rhyz'ir was too annoyed to take it, and, against their better judgement, stormed out of the lecture theatre to head home.

* * *

The streets of Titan were cold and dark; they were always cold and dark. The colony was a research centre, not a residential base. How could it be, orbiting a dead star like Sol? The system had once housed one of the two recorded pre-Censere civilisations — but that had been a long time ago.

There were artificial lights, but they were no substitutes for natural light, something which the faint, sputtering dot in the sky was quite incapable of providing. Even in its prime, the calculations showed that Sol had been a typical red star, the small, common, and long-lived stars that made up the majority of the non-degenerate mass of the Universal Island; even that would have been unsuitable for the Censere; they'd evolved around a yellow star, a rare, much more massive main-sequence star — with a pitifully short ten-billion-year lifespan.

Rhyz'ir had only seen a yellow star once; they seldom left Titan. Dark or not, hospitable or not, it was their home.

Rhyz'ir approached the long glass tube that ran as a transport system from Titan's capital to the outlying towns. The tube was encased in layers of protection, both physical and force-controlled, from the harsh weather

outside. Even in the dark, it was almost possible to discern the flecks of nitrogen- and oxygen-based snow whirling through the night sky. Something about the sight prompted a deep melancholy within the scientist, a reflection on the quiet desolation that was their own life.

This hadn't been Rhyz'ir's first encounter with Nzhi'ax, far from it. Indeed, when they'd been younger, they'd been friends.

Born to different clutches of eggs, the two had been raised separately until they reached metamorphosis, but had nonetheless quickly bonded during early education, which began almost directly afterwards.

Though insectoid, the Censere's life cycle had more than a little in common with some of the more reptilian species in the U.C.C., emerging from metamorphosis in a small form before growing out to full size, shedding their exoskeleton repeatedly as they did. It was around the time of their final shedding, where dimorphic traits emerged in gendered individuals, that Rhyz'ir and Nzhi'ax were offered positions in the research team on Locus, having both pursued a common interest in space all the way to a higher education in cosmology.

It was in the course of that research that Rhyz'ir first stumbled across the idea of 'the Big Bang' — the fringe theory that the universe had rapidly expanded from a singularity in the distant past. And at first, Nzhi'ax had been just as interested. Yet it had fallen to Rhyz'ir to present a research project to the selection board, and when the young scientist had been met with laughter and ridicule, Nzhi'ax, who was waiting to present her personal, secondary project, had stayed silent. When it was her turn, she hadn't said a word on the Big Bang research, skipping instantly to her personal presentation, and not so much as breathing Rhyz'ir's name.

Rhyz'ir understood. Of course they did. They had even maintained a reasonably amicable acquaintanceship with Nzhi'ax in the following years. Yet it had stung, as keenly as nitrogen snow on bare flesh. And it was why they were still *here*, their time spent on menial busywork, while Nzhi'ax had advanced in academia. They supposed they should be thankful that she had condescended to fly all the way to Titan for the debate, for old time's sake — but considering the outcome, they found it hard to muster up the necessary

enthusiasm. Their best shot in years had ended in failure. They were, once more, stuck here for the foreseeable future.

And it was here, lost in thought at the edge of the city, that Rhyz'ir heard an ear-splitting crack. They turned, straining to look out of the clear tube and past the flurries of chemical snow, as space itself was wrenched open and a small, wooden building *embedded* itself — at an angle — into the centre of the nearby park, splitting the hardened wax pathways it had intersected.

It was, without a doubt, a ship, a Higher-Dimensional Ship; they recognised *that* much on sight. They'd used one on occasion, albeit only to travel back about seventy billion years for cosmological observations. H.D. vessels were heavily regulated and accounted for, especially after the One Hundred and Fourth Universal War — forty billion years ago, from Rhyz'ir's perspective — had been sparked by a future time traveller.

As they approached the building, it became abundantly clear that this was no Censere ship, not from the present or future. It didn't match the design principles of the Censere whatsoever. Might another of the U.C.C. member-species have developed the technology?

Their blues all but forgotten, Rhyz'ir decided at once that it was their duty as a scientist and a citizen of the U.C.C. to investigate. Already running for the nearest exit point of the tunnels, they scanned the neighbourhood — yes! There was a Cradle nearby. They could request the relevant equipment from there. Higher-Dimensional Ships were regulated, but temporal locks and force fields were *not*; time travel was still an integral part of Censere civilisation, used not for power or entertainment, but for historical, sociological and cosmological research.

That was, of course, time travel to the *past*; after the last War, travel into the future had been banned by unanimous decree of the Council. The 'why' was left as an exercise to the inquiring citizen.

* * *

Rhyz'ir was relieved, upon their return, to find that the ship was still present, sitting absurdly in the middle of the park. The half-hour's delay had had mercifully little to do with their tattered reputation as a researcher —

credentials were credentials — and everything to do with the congenital lethargy of bureaucrats, and the lateness of the hour.

Venturing as close to the anomalous wooden shed as they dared, they wasted no time in setting up a temporal lock keyed to their biodata around the perimeter. Then, grinning now in their insect-like way at the ease of the operation, they pulled out the Tachyonic Jumpoff Detector they had managed to requisition, and, crouching, began to prime it.

"Well, now!" they muttered gleefully. "Let's see when you're from, you beauty… Who's been playing about with higher equations, hm? The Stund? The Viltrochians?"

They stared at the screen in the few seconds it took for the sophisticated device to get a fix on the tachyonic signature of the object at which it had been pointed. The Censere's biology had no pulse or adrenaline rushes, as humans would recognise them, but suffice it to say that they felt more alive than they had in a very long time.

Then the reader errored out.

Even as they grumbled and grouched, Rhyz'ir hung on to their enthusiasm and overrode the default protocols. *Then* it spat out the year negative one hundred and thirty billion, as expressed in the calendar of the Universal Cooperation Council. That alone was a jolt to their system. That would have to mean a far longer universal history than even they had ever dared to argue.

But what truly gave them a turn were the spatial coordinates.

"What? But that's absurd. That's not…" They slowed, and looked anew at the unmoving, wooden shell of the Ship. "That's not *possible*…"

Yet as always, the numbers spoke for themselves — numbers which the cosmologist recognised as corresponding to an empty quadrant of the inner part of this very star system, one which had once been the cradle of the elusive pre-Censere civilisation. Not only had this ship come from the deepest mists of time — but it had come directly from a lost planet in this very system.

Rhyz'ir stumbled under the modest weight of the Jumpoff Detector, shaken to their core.

There had long been one set of legends for which they could find no place in their model — the epics of the Great Primeval War. It had simply been too fanciful even for them to take seriously. The original civilisation behind the Locus ruins may have advanced beyond what consensus U.C.C. history recorded, but to rise so high as to rival the Gods was another matter, and as for a war fought across the Cosmos, destroying the spiritual world itself — that was plainly ludicrous. Even granting the material existence of primeval gods and celestial fortresses, such a war would leave marks that entropy could not erase, scars upon the very fabric of the universe itself — yet there was nothing. No evidence.

Until now.

Rhyz'ir set the force field generator around the ship, and keyed it to their chronogenetics, to prevent tampering. This was an insane find, but it was still late and they were still tired; with the ship locked, they knew it was safe until tomorrow, or whatever passed for tomorrow on Titan when the day-night cycle was simulated.

At least they had the white dwarf. The far side of Titan was tidally locked to its planet, a ball of liquid helium known only as Sol II, which dominated most of the sky.

But as they sat on the transport back to their home, Rhyz'ir couldn't help but think about the foreign ship. The reading surely couldn't be right, could it? It implied a universe more than twice as old as the current model, and at least eighty billion years older than even their own model.

It could be the evidence they finally needed, but their first instinct was to go to Nzhi'ax and tell her of the discovery. Old habits, but ones they couldn't shake even as they sped through the tunnel.

* * *

Rhyz'ir awoke to the streaming of artificial light through their circular windows. Pushing the lid of their pod open, their thoughts remained on dreams of abundant yellow stars and an outer darkness filled with other Universal Islands, before, as the grogginess cleared, they recalled last night's find.

A non-Censere Higher-Dimensional Ship from the distant past.

They'd have run directly to the tube system and set off immediately, were it not for their body screaming at them to have something to eat. Between the debate and the find last night, they hadn't eaten in nearly twenty five hours.

"I suppose, after two hundred and thirty billion years, the ship *can* wait just a little longer…"

As they shuffled toward their kitchen, another memory bubbled back to the forefront of their consciousness: the embarrassment of the night before, promptly bringing along the dull ache of Nzhi'ax's old betrayal. Wincing at the thought, they declined to even acknowledge their lingering desire to show her their discovery, and to work on the site together. For the moment, anyway. Once they'd made their fracas — once they had the ear of the world once more — then perhaps. Perhaps.

They placed their hands on their food pod and directed their desire into the construction of a hearty breakfast.

There was no need to actually gather ingredients and cook; such was the power of the Censere's primeval magic. They had possessed that power before their civilisation had even truly begun to develop, grown, it was said, from a gift the gods had bestowed upon the twin homeworlds of Censeron and Alkydron. The two planets had been tethered with a bridge of pure thought, made manifest by divine grace into an unbreakable, but infinitely malleable, physical link. Of course, modern science had little time for tales of gods and sky-bridges, and told itself that dubbing the Censere's psionic abilities 'applied neural biotechnology' was as good as actually explaining them.

Whatever one called it, the Censere could use the mind and its emotions to control the physical world, an ability that was only getting stronger as the

universe aged. In time, even the other species in the Universal Island had been taught to harness that strange power, and it had become the technological backbone of the U.C.C., integrated into machine designs which compensated for the clumsiness and imperfections of 'free' matter-shaping. Though its fundamental principles remained a mystery, the gift's practicalities were well-understood, and it had long become essential to the operation of everything from starships to the most mundane of home appliances.

Within moments, the food pod's membrane opened, and it ejected a leaf-wrapped, palm-sized insect, which Rhyz'ir took in one hand and began to eat. As they chewed, they waved their other hand past the front of a screen, embedded into their wall, which winked on.

"*…was found in the southern district of the capital just this morning*,," said the newscaster; his voice was familiar — the research colony only had two news anchors in all — but Rhyz'ir somehow never seemed to remember his name, "*with five stab wounds through his exoskeleton. The first violent crime to occur on Titan in three years, and the first murder in fifteen. The attack is believed to have occurred late last night…*"

Rhyz'ir froze for a moment, mandibles halfway through crushing the artificial bug. They, *themself*, had been in the southern district last night.

As a matter of fact, that was roughly where the H.D. vessel had crashed.

"Can't be…"

No, it couldn't, could it? Certainly not. Their force field should have held anything *within*, not just prevented interference from without; and surely if the victim had been found *that* close to an unknown Higher-Dimensional Ship locked under a force field, the news anchor would have mentioned it. Surely.

Surely it wasn't standard protocol to avoid public mention of any and all unidentified ships that had not caused a serious public disturbance. Surely Rhyz'ir *didn't* recall that from some of their perusal of the local legal ordinances. No, sir… Not at all…

Oh, nuts.

The fact was that unidentified Higher-Dimensional Ships were assumed to be from the future, and thus, to avoid hindering their crew's presumably-future-U.C.C.-approved mission or — gods forbid — induce some sort of paradox, standard protocol called for present-day U.C.C. officials to carefully avoid so much as *documenting* unidentified ships.

Not officially, anyway. Rhyz'ir was sure they had a secret list stashed away someplace. Still, they could at least rely on a few days, perhaps weeks, before the U.C.C. proper figured out that this ship was something completely different — unless they called it in first.

Deciding that they had a duty to Science to make better use of that grace period than snacking on pod-bugs, they stuffed down the unchewed remainder of the constructed insect, waved off the screen — and rushed out the door, T.J.D. in hand.

It occurred to them, halfway to the nearest tube network access point, that they ought perhaps to have brought a weapon; but then they remembered that they didn't own one in the first place, and put it out of their mind.

* * *

Sitting on the transport, Rhyz'ir stared down at the Detector, flicking through the other readings. Despite its name, the device took readings on more than just tachyons. Though those readings had been the most interesting at the time, in the brief scan the other night, the device had also taken readings for chronons, accelerons, photons, axions, dyons and gravitons.

These particles were either extremely short-lived or dissipated extremely fast, but the rules changed when time travel was thrown into the mix.

Of the readings, those of the accelerons and gravitons were the most useful, as the acceleron concentration of the Universe seemed to increase over time, and the readings from the ship independently dated it to the exact same year — negative one hundred and thirty billion.

As for the gravitons, well —

— well, they seemed to imply that —

— well —

—well, the root of the matter was —

— the root of the matter was Nzhi'ax had been the expert in Loop Quantum Gravity theory, not Rhyzi'r.

That settled it, they were taking the readings to her. Betrayal or not, she had once been a friend. And if they were honest, they'd missed that.

* * *

It had been a busy morning for Nzhi'ax. No time for breakfast; off to the dean's office, on emergency call, for a briefing on some sighting in a park, and then straight to her scheduled battery of guest lectures. She had already done one on stellar evolution and had three more lined up: one on the large scale structure, another on determining the age of the universe, and, just for the road, a final one on the binary supermassive black holes at the centre of the universe.

She thanked the gods of academic schedules that she was at least permitted half-hour breaks in-between each lecture. She loved this stuff, she truly did, but such amounts of it in quick succession, recited by rote to crowds of blank-faced hatchlings, had a way of getting overwhelming. Besides, her thoughts were still hung up on how the debate had ended last night. Not that her views on her old friend's nonsense had altered overnight — no, she would maintain to all comers that she'd been as harsh as Rhyz'ir's ideas had warranted — but she *was* worried they'd taken it personally.

That worry was cut short as the door to her break room spun open to reveal none other than Rhyz'ir.

"You…"

Nzhi'ax stared, antennae twitching. For all that she'd seen Rhyz'ir less than a day prior, it felt as though a figure from the depths of her past had suddenly appeared before her. It took her a moment to realise that it was the spark of giddy *joy* in Rhyz'ir's faceted eyes, and not just Rhyz'ir themself. She hadn't seen *that* in a very, very long time.

"N'zhiax! May I come in?"

"I — er, yes —" Nzhi'ax managed after a few silent clicks of their mandibles, prompting the slightly shorter Censere to charge into the room, forcing her to step back to avoid a collision. "I-Is that a T.J.D. you're holding?"

"Ah, you noticed! Nzhi'ax, I need you to look at this."

Nzhi'ax reluctantly took the detector, fully ready to shoot them down — and then to apologise, for that and for last night.

She looked at the screen, and her breathing caught.

"This is about the ship, the ship in the park," she said, monotone, eyes fixed on the screen.

"You know about it!" Rhyz'ir cried out joyfully, pressing themself right up against her with easy familiarity, so as to look over her shoulder at the screen. "Good, good! That saves time. They *would* tell you, wouldn't they?"

"Well, yes," she confirmed in a distant voice, almost grateful for the distracting babble. "As long as I was in town, they may as well have done, my credentials far oustrip anyone they've got on… Anyone they've… Rhyz'ir?"

"Yes?"

"Rhyz'ir," she said, very gravely, "these graviton readings don't make any sense."

"I know!" Rhyz'ir cackled joyfully.

The larger pattern was fine enough — that of a small rocky planet orbiting a relatively large yellow star… but the background, the background was all wrong. The graviton background was *always* supposed to be basically the same, because it represented the gravitational effect of the Universal Island as a whole on whatever planet the ship had last been to. But this one? Completely different, much more dispersed, much smaller. If this were to be believed, this ship didn't come from the Universal Island at all. Either that, or…

"Check the tachyons! Check the tachyons!" her old friend prodded her, shaking with excitement, in the voice of a kid pointing at some fireworks.

She switched the readout.

"Minus one hundred and thirty *billion*? What in the names of the gods is this?"

"It's exactly what it looks like. It's exactly what it *is*. I'm the one who found the Higher-Dimensional Ship last night — more than that, I saw it *land*!"

"And you didn't *report* it?!"

"No, because I was busy scanning it! And *this* is what I found!"

"But that's impossible," Nzhi'ax retorted, flicking again through the other readings, but they were all self-consistent at a glance.

She looked up at Rhyz'ir, and was surprised to see their face so close to hers, faceted eyes *fizzing* with childlike excitement.

"Want to see?"

There was only one answer to that.

To Hell with lectures.

By the looks of this, none of her syllabus was worth a damn, anyway.

* * *

Titan's capital, unimaginatively named 'Settlement One', was primarily built upward and downward, not outward. As such, the walk from the lecture hall to the Higher-Dimensional Ship didn't take long — but it was, at the very least, enough time for Nzhi'ax to apologise for how the debate had ended. She was almost shocked at how quickly Rhyz'ir forgave them for years' worth of belittlement and cowardice; she somehow feared their mind was elsewhere.

But then, in all honesty, so was hers.

Arriving at the ship, they had found it still shielded and embedded in the park — though now being looked on by a few bystanders. At once, Rhyz'ir handed the T.J.D. to Nzhi'ax, who was unsurprised to find her own readings

matched Rhyz'ir's exactly. After that, it had been a few minutes' work to disperse the gawkers and disable the force field.

"Identical, I take it?" asked Rhyz'ir; had they been a kind of creature who possessed eyebrows, they would have waggled then.

"*Precisely* identical," Nzhi'ax replied. "Almost *concerningly* so — it must have been parked for *years* at, at whatever its previous coordinates were. Only way such a small ship would give such strong readings so long after crashing."

"Mh? Who says it crashed?"

"Well, who'd choose to land here of all places? In such a public place, I mean? Oh, you're the one who saw it get here… Did the manoeuvre look finely controlled to *you*?"

"Ah — no, I suppose not," Rhyz'ir admitted, thinking back. "There, you see, it's good I brought you along. I hadn't thought of that! Or the thing about the strength of the readings…"

"Yes, well… We have bigger problems. Rhyz'ir, this craft…." Nzhi'ax lowered the device and stepped closer to the unassuming wooden shed. "It's not one of ours."

"Glad you agree! All readings aside, it's just not our style, is it? Wood! Who'd have wood?"

Nzhi'ax turned. "Do you know what this means? This could change *everything*."

"No kidding."

"…Right, sorry. You've been trying to change everything all along. Stupid of me."

"Ah? Do my auditory feelers deceive me? Is that an admission that I was right?"

"Of course not," Nzhi'ax protested, a little playfully perhaps. "You're still cherry-picking. These data could *easily* mean something else entirely — we have to explore every possibility."

"Yes, yes," Rhyz'ir admitted. They couldn't seem to take their eyes off the miraculous ship, but they turned a fraction towards Nzhi'ax as they added, voice almost conspiratorial: "The standard model's glozzort is cooked, though, I think it's fair to say. Wouldn't you agree?"

"…Yes," she sighed good-naturedly. "And your theory's looking hardier than ever. Well, we'll see. How much equipment did you bring?"

"Only the Detector, force field and locks," they admitted. "I don't have the authority to request more."

Despite her old friend's characteristic coyness, Nzhi'ax smiled at the unstated request, which she instantly recognised as such.

"I do; wait here, I'll pop by the Cradle and get everything I can."

* * *

Rhyz'ir watched their friend run until she disappeared from sight around the bend of one of the park walkways. Then, they glanced up at the ever-dark sky — half filled with stars, the other half a void — and wondered. Wondered where this ship had come from, what that place had looked like…

Wondered why they couldn't travel back to it.

Wondered if, perhaps, they *could*.

Somehow, they hadn't thought of that until now. All legalities aside, the Censere's Higher-Dimensional Ships physically *couldn't* go back further than seventy billion years; as one approached that barrier, exponential amounts of additional power were required, until the ship inevitably failed. The U.C.C.'s time-engineers had come to view this as simply another 'hard' limit of reality, no different from the speed of light for normal-space travel.

But *this* ship had existed before the time barrier — their culture's 'outskirts of history'. Those readings didn't just mean those phantom billions of years for whose existence they had argued tooth and nail had *truly existed*. It meant they were *accessible*. It meant travel on the other side of the barrier was possible.

Rhyz'ir couldn't just prove it. With a bit of luck, now… they might *see* it.

* * *

Before long, Nzhi'ax had returned with as much equipment as she could requisition, which was damn well near the Cradle's entire investigative armoury — and they'd got right to work.

Early on, more accurate graviton readings had enabled them to 'split' the single background signal, which was normally the faintest signal in the graviton readings, into two separate signals. There was one which resembled a smaller, flatter version of the Universal Island's signature — and then, there was an even fainter 'super-background' that defied understanding.

They'd reduced the location down to a terrestrial planet in this very system, most likely one of the small ones near the core, which would have been wiped out by the death of their star. Their existence, though theoretical, was generally accepted even by the stodgiest within U.C.C. academia; Censere records went back far enough that there were a few which spoke of 'Sol VI' and 'Sol VII' to refer to the modern 'Sol I' and 'Sol II'.

All that was just the start. The *mass* of the ship made no sense given its size — and then there was the design, which bore some curious material similarities to the ruins on Locus.

It was when the night came, after almost twenty-six hours of work, that Nzhi'ax made her request at last.

"Rhyz'ir, we need more information."

"Of course we do! Hand me the chrononic wave emulator, will you?"

"What I mean," she elaborated, steeling herself and avoiding her old friend's eyes — "is that we need to take this back to my lab."

"What?" Rhyz'ir shook their head slightly, as if to laugh off the notion. "No. You can't!" they scoffed.

"Its mass is considerable, but it's nothing a few grade-five graviton dampeners can't fix. My ship —"

"No, I mean, you *can't*," Rhyz'ir said more seriously. "*Nzhi'ax*. I asked for your *help*. This ship is my discovery. It stays between us."

"Oh, come on, now… Rhyz'ir." She caught herself just in time. She had almost called them *honoured kin*, with all the distance that implied — as if they'd been back on the debate floor. "It's too late for that! I *knew* it was here before you told me — and the Dean knows *I'm* here. I did tell them where I was going when I cancelled my lectures, you know — I have responsibilities!"

"Yes, alright! You're here! I'm not trying to turn you away," they tempered. "But this should be *ours*, you know. Not your team's, or your university's, *ours*."

"I have better equipment…"

"Yeah, and lab technicians who'll take this discovery and —"

"And erase your name from it? Come on, you… You can't think *that* of me," Nzhi'ax interjected, ending their sentence in a more vulnerable tone than she'd started it.

"No, of course not," Rhyz'ir sighed. "But they'll downplay its significance. You saw what they did to me for suggesting an out-there theory; what *you* let them *do* to me. I wasn't fired, or witch-hunted… They just said no, and left me here to marinate in my failure."

"This is undeniable —"

"My *data* were undeniable. They always have been. I won't let it all happen again, not this time. We're going to wring all the data we can out of this thing before we go public — and we'll do it *together*. You promise me, Nzhi'ax," they demanded, voice broken and urgent, one hand squeezing hers. "You *will not* go behind my back. You will not betray me. You will not let them say: oh, interesting, Mx Rhyz'ir. Food for thought, we'll call you, move along, please. No. You know what this *means*. So say it. *With me*. To whomever will listen. As loudly as it takes, as many times as it takes. *Promise*."

Her antennae were *shaking*, every breathing-opening in her body shivering.

"Alright. I-I promise."

At that, Rhyz'ir gave her hand a final squeeze — and exhaled.

The smile was back, though a little more tired than before.

Nzhi'ax smiled back, hoping Rhyz'ir could see that she meant it — and hoping that she really *did*.

"Good!" said Rhzy'ir. "Alright! Good, good, good. Fine. So!" They clapped their hands together, and skipped closer to the ship again with a few, hopping steps. "To work! You analyse the unidynamics, you're better with gravity and electromagnetism. I'll handle the other two, the strong and weak forces, and we'll meet back here tomorrow to do the L.Q.G. analysis."

"Got it!" Nzhi'ax replied, picking up the graviton detector and a few other scattered pieces of equipment before setting off.

The artificial lights were dimming once again. Rhyz'ir set the force field back before heading back to the nearby tube station.

It had been a good day, a better day than they'd had in a long time.

Oh, how they'd missed working with Nzhi'ax.

They hoped she meant it. Even after just one day — they didn't think they could face losing this again.

* * *

The tube took about ten minutes to cross the frozen wastes of Titan before opening up as it came to a halt in Rhyz'ir's hometown, similarly unimaginatively named 'Settlement Eight'. Once a research colony, always a research colony — they had a bit more of a population now than when it had first been founded, but no one had found it worth the paperwork to change the names. They'd actually put it to vote a couple of years back, but people had voted against it.

Within those ten minutes, the streets had, predictably, gone dark for the simulated nighttime — lit only by the dim light of Sol, the white dwarf still hanging above.

Rhyz'ir's house was another good walk from the tube station, and the only three or four other Censere on the tube with them had broken off early, leaving them wandering alone through the alleys in the dark and cold.

Of course, violent crime was a rarity on Titan, but that didn't stop their primordial instincts from irrationally heightening their anxiety, especially after the murder last night. Oh, gods, the murder. They'd almost forgotten. Well, the force field had been intact — surely nothing could have gotten out. Surely it had been a coincidence after all…

Hearing a pattering behind them, they turned to see nothing but a small animal darting into the shadows. Titan had no native life, not anymore, but there were a few imported animals and plants; pets, at first, like the vivacious Aticipter birds — or set-dressing for the parks. But inevitably, a few small creatures had come to live on the streets, in the gutters, on the rooftops — in all the cracks of urban life. Nobody minded or worked to fix it; it made the colony feel a bit more alive. Anything to forget they were stuck on a dead world orbiting a dead star.

There were no further scares before they made their way home. Placing their equipment down on the table, they headed over to their screen, half-hoping to hear that the morning's murderer had been safely apprehended, far, far away from the H.D. vessel.

Before they could wave it on, however, they heard a crash coming from their bedroom.

Had someone broken in? But why? Almost on instinct, they ran into the room. Towards the burglar, if it came to that… the murderer, perhaps. Was that smart? But then again, they were hardly any safer here, one unlocked bedroom door away. They may as well know what they were up against. Such was the long and short of their split-second reasoning by the time they switched on the light —

— and found a strange, furry animal that they had never seen before, sitting atop the sleeping pod as if waiting for them to enter.

But how had it got in — how had it managed to —

It seemed to be pointing at something with its… mandibles? It didn't look insectoid; it didn't have mandibles, exactly. Jaws, Rhyz'ir thought they were called. Well, the pointy bit of its head, anyway. But what was it pointing *at,* and why?

Wait, had it carved… a sentence into the wall?

Rhyz'ir read it; it was uneven and written in an archaic script, but it was still *readable*. Perhaps not an animal, then — but they thought they knew every species in the U.C.C., at least by sight, and none looked like this. Some experiment? An exotic android? The writing offered little by way of information — little, and, yet, everything.

I CAME FROM SHIP.

I AM LOTTO.

Rhyz'ir stared at the animal in shock.

"Can you… talk?"

The animal shook its head, then gestured to the phrase on the wall again.

"Oh. Of course. You wouldn't have gone to the trouble — but — but you can understand?"

The animal nodded.

By the gods. It *did* understand. They'd only half-believed it when they'd said it, but the creature's body language had shifted, and there was an intelligence there, a genuine sapience. In point of fact, the being looked impatient.

"So you — you came in the Higher-Dimensional Ship?"

The animal nodded again, then barked affirmatively; the cry was not one Rhyz'ir recognised, but they could still interpret it. They looked the animal up and down.

"What kind of species even *are* you? You're not reptilian, not insectoid, avian…? No, no feathers, that's fur. But you can't be an arachnid either, no

exoskeleton, four limbs so not nimian. Definitely not stellarian, you're hardly suited for the surface of a star, nor vacuum-dwelling… arboreal, perhaps?"

The animal shook its head, before jumping down from the pod and running out of the room. Rhyz'ir immediately chased only to find the animal playing with the screen on the wall, paws clumsily padding at the clear, synthetic material that made up the screen itself — perhaps looking in vain for some manual control.

"Hold on, I'll do it —"

With a few waves of their hands and a minor exertion of Censere will, Rhyz'ir, guessing their guest's probable intent, brought up a kind of phylogenetic tree on the screen. For reasons which science could not discern, evolution throughout the Universal Island seemed to converge on a finite number of branching trends, beyond what convergence of convenience could justify. It was one of the last great mysteries, often cited by the religious as evidence for the existence of the gods — or at least their *past* existence, for there were signs on the few uninhabited worlds of the outer systems that recent evolutionary patterns were breaking new ground.

The point was that, through a combination of observation, fossil analysis and time travel, the Censere's biologists had pieced those trends together into a classification system that covered every lifeform in the Council's purview — living or extinct.

Rhyz'ir marvelled as the animal — no, it was getting absurd to think of it as such — as *Lotto* pointed at a small branch off the side of the reptile physiology. Rhyz'ir squinted, and found that they were gesturing at a minor divergent group labelled 'mammals', only found on a fraction of the Stellarian planets which displayed the Type Three evolutionary archetypes.

"Mammalian? You're *mammalian*? But the last known planetary branch of *that* archetype died out ninety billion years ago…"

Lotto barked at that.

"I'm sorry, if this is speech, I can't understand it —" They cocked their head. "But… but you're telling me the year is significant, yes?"

There was another bark, and Rhyz'ir didn't need to ask to know it was affirmative.

Rhyz'ir directed a thought at the screen, and pulled up the conventionally established timeline of Censere history, going back a hundred billion years to the earliest recorded historical event — the discovery of Censere space travel.

They breathed the question out in an awed whisper.

"When are you from?"

Lotto just stared at the screen in confusion. The conclusion was obvious; Rhyz'ir didn't know whether to groan or cheer. Evidently, none of the historical events, not even the cosmological ones, registered to the creature.

"Oh, me, oh, my. Well, if when won't work — how about where? Hm? Where are you from, 'Lotto', besides 'the ship'?"

As they formulated the question, they pulled up a map of the Universal Island. Lotto stared at it in confusion, then seemed to catch on as the picture began to change. The Universal Island grew brighter as more yellow stars appeared — then a piece of it broke off into a brilliant spiral which swung away from the rest and began floating around it, a separate island orbiting the main.

Rhyz'ir recoiled in shock. They'd accessed the system? Not just understood how it worked, but actually *altered* it? Then they had the power, as strong as any Censere! They watched, transfixed, as the galactic splinter vanished into the distance. The Universal Island seemed somehow perturbed; it shuddered, and then — its centre bifurcated, and swirls began to emerge in the previously uniform, elliptical mass. The Island was pulling itself apart, the two main components passing back through one another a few times before separating into two large spirals. As they did, the surrounding darkness began to resolve itself into more and more spots of light.

And then the view pulled away from the components of the Universal Island, flying at great speeds through massive filaments of distant light before coming, at last, to another spiral, elongated, with a bar in the centre and large, larger than either of the ones left behind.

Lotto pointed at that spiral, looking impressed with themselves.

Rhyz'ir didn't even know how to respond, or interpret, what had just happened. It was beyond what they could comprehend, even as one who believed there was more to the Universe than anyone else even dreamed.

"You can stay here, I… need to rest," they said in a dazed voice. "I'm, oh, I'm sorry. We'll — we'll talk tomorrow alright. Yes? You better, uhm, keep practicing with the screen," Rhyz'ir weakly suggested.

Then they disappeared into the bedroom, as the spiral faded slowly from the screen.

* * *

Early in the morning on the next day, Rhyz'ir emerged from the bedroom to see a vague image of a red planet on their screen instead of the morning news. As they stepped into the living room, the image vanished; looking for the source of the change, the bleary scientist's eyes quickly landed on the furry being. Lotto was sitting there, plain as day — not that Titan's days were all that plain — and turned to greet them.

"Ah. Not a dream, then."

Their guest seemed in high spirits, tail wagging with energy to match an Aticipiter. There was something distinctly animalistic about the reaction, instinctive and immediate; for just a moment, Rhyz'ir wondered if they *had* somehow dreamed *part* of last night — if, in some half-dreaming fugue state, they had confused some lost exotic pet for the occupant of the mystery ship.

Well, they *were* a scientist. When a hypothesis occurred, it wouldn't do but to put it to the test.

"You're… Lotto, yes?"

Lotto barked affirmatively, ceasing their welcome as they did and sitting obediently as if expecting further questions.

Right, all clear. All real.

Ahem.

"The Higher-Dimensional Ship," they blurted out, keen not to appear to be falling behind. "Yours, is it?"

Lotto shook their head. They nodded in the direction of the screen, and a purple, humanoid silhouette appeared on the monitor. The true owner, Rhyz'ir guessed.

That only raised more questions, but they were complex ones and the communication barrier was hard enough, so they decided to stick to simple ones for the moment.

"Right, I see. Let's put a pin in that. You, you're from the past, is that right?"

An affirmative bark. Well, it *had* already been kind of obvious, but in this as with the rest of their theories, it was nice to have absolute confirmation at last. Now, there were so many more questions they could get to: 'why are you here?' 'How did you get past the time barrier?' 'What's the past *like*?'

…'Can you take me there?'

But Rhyz'ir controlled themself. "The planet you last came from, it's in the Sol system, correct?"

Another affirmative bark, then an inquisitive one. Rhyz'ir seemed to get the gist: Lotto was asking where they were right now.

"Sol II-B," they explained. "That is, it's a moon, not an independent world. The old chronicles called it Titan… The name has stuck, at least with those of us who have a romantic bend of mind."

Lotto cocked their strange, furry head to one side, then glanced at the screen. At their unstated bidding, an image popped up — a rendition of a yellow moon orbiting a large ringed gas giant. After a moment, it flew outwards to show a yellow star, four rocky inner planets — and then the known Sol I-IV as gas giants rather than helium balls.

"The Sol System," Rhyz'ir indicated their recognition. "Before… before the end. Oh my. You knew it, then — but where…?"

Lotto yipped, and the image zoomed to this ancient system's 'Sol III'; by the looks of it, a typical Type IX Habitable World. Liquid water, stable atmosphere and all that.

Had there really been a world *that* alive in this system? Rhyz'ir knew of no reason why it shouldn't have been possible; Sol had been a living star once, after all — but it felt at odds with how they'd always known the system to be. The Sol they knew was a dead star, had been for the entirety of its known history, and if the tachyon readings were to be believed, it'd probably been dead for far longer than even that. It was one thing to *know* that time erased all things, and another to see it so… plainly.

There was just one question Rhyz'ir desperately wanted answered, now, even if it did feel a little like cheating.

"Did the Universe begin with a rapid expansion of space, a Big Bang?"

Lotto seemed unsure how to properly respond, as if the question was not quite so easy to answer, but eventually they nodded in confirmation.

Rhyz'ir felt instantly vindicated. They were right.

They'd always been right.

They'd been *right*!…

They allowed themselves a moment to imagine the faces of those high and mighty committees when they were finally told —

— and felt their heart sinking.

Ah. Right. *Nẓhi'ax*. The appointment.

"Oh, dear, I just remembered. I have to meet up with a — friend. It's, it's really quite important. I do hate to leave you — erm — stay here, alright? I'll see you in a few hours! Ever so sorry —"

Lotto barked in protest, but Rhyz'ir was out the door too quickly for the small mammal to do anything about it. Annoyed, but otherwise accepting, Lotto turned back to the screen and began pushing thoughts into it once more.

* * *

"Sorry I'm late Nzhi'ax, got caught up. There's big news —"

Nzhi'ax turned from the equipment surrounding the ship.

"Yeah, I heard. Five murders in one day — unprecedented. I'm glad you're my alibi — off-worlder in town, famous or not I might turn into a suspect. If this were a novel, it'd be that, or I'd be the detective."

"Er, yes, I imagine so," Rhyz'ir said, Nzhi'ax's babble a good opportunity to gather themself and decide *not* to act shocked about those grisly news. "You — you brought the computers?"

"I have everything," Nzhi'ax confirmed. "I've just been waiting for you —"

"Oh, that's, that's very kind," Rhyz'ir replied, taken aback. "I'm, uh, I didn't mean — I *am* sorry I was a bit slow getting here, you really didn't have to —"

"I had no *choice*, Rhyz'ir," the other scientist interrupted, though she was smiling as she said it.

"What?"

"You put a chronogenetic lock on the force field. Remember? I *couldn't* open it without you. What happened to doing this together, mh?"

"Ah, uhm, fair point," they chuckled, sheepish. "Hang on, I'll add you to the codes."

Nzhi'ax waved her hand dismissively.

"Later, later. We need to get this analysis done — and… well, take a look."

"At wh — oh, I *see*."

As Rhyz'ir approached the forcefield generator, it quickly became obvious that someone had tried to remove it; the casing had been scratched, though the device itself remained undamaged. "Nzhi'ax? You didn't try to force this off did you?"

"What? No, of course not. Who do you take me for?"

"Right. But then, who… who did this?"

Nzhi'ax glanced at the wooden structure. "The original owner?"

"What? You mean they might have slipped out after the crash, but before I set up the force field? While I was off at the Cradle…" Rhyz'ir recalled the silhouette from the screen — and Lotto. *Ah*. If one of them had made it out, it did stand to reason. "Well, it's possible," they admitted aloud, still debating whether to tell Nzhi'ax about their houseguest. "But what this vandal has done, it's *crude*. What kind of space-time-traveller would come to a research colony, in a ship this advanced, and just… It doesn't make *sense*."

"Yes, well," Nzhi'ax huffed, "if they want their ship back, they'll bloody well have to ask, and nicely. We could play twenty questions. The things they could tell us, the things they might have seen…"

Oh yes, thought Rhyz'ir. Such wonders. A universe of light and warmth, other Universal Islands, a cosmos so *vast*… Even now, the scientist couldn't wrap their head around it.

"Anyway, I did the unidynamic analysis last night — could hardly stop myself. I assume you feel the same? What 'you got?"

"I… uh… no, I didn't do any — work. Was tired, sorry," Rhyz'ir lamely replied.

Part of them *hurt* at keeping secrets from Nzhi'ax, and so soon after they'd rekindled their friendship. But somehow, they didn't want to tell her about Lotto, not yet. Not until they were sure it was safe, and necessary. It wasn't exactly a matter of trust, though the scar of Nzhi'ax's old betrayal was aching again, more dully than before, but still noticeable at the back of their mind. No, the truth was that Rhyz'ir didn't want to let Lotto come between them before they themselve knew quite what to make of the furry visitor from beyond.

Nzhi'ax stared at them oddly, but seemed to accept the lie, in the absence of an alternative explanation. She passed them a computer.

"Do it now, then," she advised. "Go on, run the numbers. Then I'll give you my interpretation".

"Evidence of the Big Bang?"

"Wait and see! I'm not ruling it out. …But it's not the only possible explanation, Rhyz'ir".

"I know, I know…"

Rhyz'ir got to work on the analysis, as Nzhi'ax explained the unidynamic data. The work was feverish, punctuated by arguments about the shape of what it all meant, which became clearer with each new datum. As the two of them worked, Rhyz'ir became more and more assured of their theories; even Nzhi'ax, though clearly annoyed at the comprehensiveness of Rhyz'ir's vindication, soon had to concede about the static Universe and its age, at the very least.

After the completion of the chromodynamic analysis, the two got started on L.Q.G. — although Rhyz'ir found themselves repeatedly discarding variables needlessly to achieve their points.

Somewhere along the way, Nzhi'ax reminded Rhyz'ir to add her biodata to the temporal lock and force field, so that their tardiness wouldn't inhibit further analysis. With that done, the two took a break from the physics for a light bit of burglary — but the lock on the wooden doors resisted even a dimensional-cracker, a device designed specifically to break into Higher-Dimensional Ships. Even with all her prestige and credentials, Nzhi'ax had quite a time requisitioning one of *those* from the Cradle.

And then, came Rhyz'ir's discovery on the photon spectra; a faint but perfect blackbody in the 160 GHz band, what they immediately dubbed 'Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation'.

There was only one problem with that further discovery, and it wasn't the stark coincidence of them having landed upon the very name which the humans of Old Earth had once employed for it, of which Rhyz'ir was, and would remain, blissfully unaware.

No, the problem was this: Nzhi'ax was unconvinced.

"We have no idea what environment this timeship came from, look at all the interference in the higher and lower bands. How do you know this signal isn't just part of a primitive radio communication?"

"Oh, come *on*, Nzhi'ax! We're well past that. Look! If you extrapolate it forward to our time, you get a Cosmic Ultra-Low-Frequency Background Radiation, blocked not only by the Universal Island's main interstellar dust, but even by the dust it sheds out into the void. That's why, even here at the edge of the universe, it can't be detected."

"That, or it doesn't exist and you're reaching… again. We're supposed to be examining every possibility, and yet you're bent on proving your specific theory is right!"

"Are you sure you're not discussing what you and your establishment used to do in defence of the standard model!"

"Urgh! That doesn't make it *right*," Nzhi'ax groaned. "Please, Rhyz'ir. I've already admitted that we've been wrong, about everything, for centuries. What more do you *want*? Why does your specific hypothesis have to be right in every detail? Never mind that it's bloody annoying, it's compromising our research."

"*Look* at the evidence," Rhyz'ir retorted, trying to keep their tone from rising. "All the arguments you'd brought up in the lecture have been overturned. Why keep fighting for a lost cause?"

"Gah! You're impossible! Even *if* you're right," she argued, "we need to do all the steps! You're skipping steps to get the outcome you want. *As always*. It's like you haven't changed."

"Why should *I* change?! I'm the one who's been right all the time!"

Nzhi'ax rose sharply from their shared crouch by the instruments, and turned her back, pacing in a narrow circle.

"I can't keep *doing* this now!" she complained, as much to herself as to Rhyz'ir. "See, this — *this* is why I didn't defend you back then! You won't, you can't ever just *stop* and, and *listen*! You must always be right, you can't compromise! Well — well if you can't, *I* can't. I'll —" She exhaled, and

stormed off towards the park's exit. "I'll see you, Rhyz'ir. I just — I can't do this right now."

Rhyz'ir watched her go in horrified silence — then punched the side of the ship. The wood thumped dully under their first.

"Fine! Go!" they shouted. "I didn't need you before, I don't need you now!"

She couldn't hear them, by now, and they knew that — but they were just so… frustrated. They turned back to the ship, but couldn't refocus, couldn't put Nzhi'ax out of their head; it was just like before.

Eventually, they sighed in defeat, re-enabled the force field and left the site. They could always try again tomorrow, once they'd calmed down.

Besides, there was Lotto to think of. Ah yes. The thought of the strange creature, and the secrets it held, proved the perfect distraction from Nzhi'ax's words, which had begun to circle over and over in their head as they wondered if Nzhi'ax may have been right after all.

Even with that, the tube ride home felt much longer than it normally did, and even staring through the transparent roof and out into the stars did little to quell the anxieties that welled up inside their very core. The walk home was similarly agonising. '*Was she right?*', they couldn't help but ask themself. That betrayal, that act of cowardice which had stung so sharply for so long — had they deserved that all along? Lotto would have no answer to *that* question, whatever cosmic mysteries their alien knowledge might unlock.

Yet Rhyz'ir was right. That thought, even simpler than the ringing, aching sense of guilt at alienating Nzhi'ax, seemed to have overpowered all other concerns by the time they reached their house.

They were *right*.

No one had listened to them. And they'd been right all along.

* * *

Agent 'Lotto IV' - Report 53/05-102/17 #24:

Do I *have* to submit these? They're so boring. And it's not easy to write without opposable thumbs; our tech's not designed for this. You know, if you wanted proper reports with the proper formatting, you shouldn't have sent an agent who can barely type, let alone one who *can't speak*.

OK, fine… You asked for this, you'll get it. So long as it gets me back to the Ishiok.

Archivist's Note: The Ishiok Galaxy, less fancifully classified as HCM-6A, is a large spiral galaxy located approximately 28,000,000,000 light-years from the Stellarian Spiral Galaxy, and whose diameter is estimated at double that of the latter. The present intelligence report was initially transmitted for analysis and archival to the Ishiok's local extrapolation of the Morning Star (see 'Multiplication Operations Record - Bifurcation Project - Spatial Parameters').

And yes, before you ask, the current censorship protocols have been applied alright. After *last* time, I know not to mess that up again — you can spare the lecture.

I'm not sure how well this mission has been going, in terms of gathering intelligence and whatnot, because let me tell you, I'm no closer than when I left to understanding who 'Lilith' is, what the 'House of the Fallen' is, or what it even means to be a 'survivor' of Lilith's 'absorption' of the 'Demesne of the Fallen'. Did you mean 'invasion'? Do I even want to know?

Then again, I suppose you already know all that general stuff, and you just elected not to give me any context. Thanks.

The good news is that I've had plenty of opportunities to get to look at our guy up, close, and personal. I'm not sure how this happened, but, as a matter of fact, the first phase of my assignment resulted in the target and myself careening past the Outskirts of History aboard the target's time-ship. We've now crashed in the year 236,517,172,709 AD. (Sorry?)

Archivist's Note: The year has been corrected for the record; Agent Lotto IV's original text read '23,999,999,999,999 or something', a figure which is off by one order of magnitude from where the Agent was recovered and was clearly not intended as a precise statement of fact.

Here's what I *can* tell you about the guy at least. Name's Reinbrand. He-they… Human, at first, but, you know, Fallen — bad case of corrupted chronogenetics. Which mostly means he looks really weird. No pupils, skin and hair are all a dull blue. Weirdest I've seen yet, but I guess it's a look.

Archivist's Note: It is worth remembering that Agent Lotto's fourth physical manifestation, and their current one as of the writing of the report, was patterned after the genetics of the Sol III native species 'Canis familiaris', albeit modified to support higher brain functions. Consequently, for the duration of their existence within that particular vessel, Lotto was afflicted with a case of natural deuteranopia, and could only detect light in the 380-700 nanometre range.

I don't think much of R-Guy's fashion sense, either, but I guess you might feel differently about robes than I do. Mean-looking helmet, too, though I can't blame him for hiding his face. I would, too. I don't mean because he's all blue and corrupted-looking, it takes all sorts — I mean because he's the kinda guy who goes around kicking adorable puppies without a second thought.

Ouch.

Anyway, when I first tracked him down, Rey-Rey was hiding out underneath some abandoned megamall on Sol III, somewhere in the rattiest sections of 2036 AD. I guess you knew that, since you beamed me there to begin with. Here's something you might have missed, though: the place was trashed. Meaning, it took a good few hours to get from where you dropped me off to the target's *actual* location. And yeah, I guess you might not have wanted me to incur unacceptable risk of premature detection, or however your game-logicians would put it. It's just, look — I'm not saying it wasn't *fun* to run around that place for a while, but it got old after the tenth vent I had to crawl through and the fifteenth rubble pile I had to climb over, all just to reach yet another locked door. Complete with another half hour of backtracking to get around it.

Don't know why I'm complaining to you guys, to be honest. Not like you're gonna change your strategy just 'cause it was moderately inconvenient for me, and I don't feel like venting is helping my mood any, honestly. Fine, I'll get back to the stuff you actually want a report on.

So, Reinbrand was down in this cave in a sinkhole below the building, trying to extract a chronogenetic signature from what remained of a dead body; not sure why. I think it was the remains of his normal-time counterpart, but Hell if I know what happened for the guy to end up in *that* state. Fallen-Reinbrand looks like he's *tough*.

I'm skimming this section but it's all routine and typing is hard ok, the later bit is much more fun and I feel you guys would find it more interesting too.

Anyway, their time-ship was open, so I figured I'd take a look — what good is being all small and quiet and unassuming if you can't sneak under the bad guy's nose sometimes? Looked about how you'd expect for a Ship of the Fallen. Trouble was, they came back in and took off while I was still nosing around. Then they caught me, and well, you know how well this body handles in a fight. A couple of bites to their arm and a retaliatory kick against the wall later — yeah, remember the kicking? I'm sure I mentioned the kicking — blam, all of a sudden the Ship is careening forwards through time, and Reinbrand's too busy trying to control the thing to worry about me. Like I said, I don't know what happened there exactly. I'm not sure Reinbrand does either.

So explosions, damage, crash, unconscious, I wake up before he does, I sneak out again… oh you know all this, you get millions of reports just like this I'm sure, let's just skip to the important stuff…

…*after* I take a break. Guys, seriously, this is *so* boring — I've been working on this report for hours!

I'll send the rest in a second report, alright?

Archivist's Note: This report was compiled in 00:10:33.12.

Report Ends

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TO BE CONTINUED